

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

Issue 2. Prelude to the Massacre, September 10, 2000



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From the AP Editorial Desk

On July 11, 1995, and over the following days, thousands of Bosnian Muslims were murdered in the area surrounding Srebrenica. To this day, the exact death toll is unknown, but the massacre has gone down in history as the worst in Europe since World War II. It was carried out with heartless cruelty -- and with the world watching. The credibility of the United Nations, which had declared Srebrenica a "safe area," has yet to recover.

On July 15, 2000, some of the survivors of the Srebrenica massacre crossed the inter-entity boundary in convoy to mark the fifth anniversary of the massacre. They attended a simple ceremony of remembrance at Potočari, the suburb of Srebrenica where the Serbs collected their captives after the town fell. The men and boys were separated and taken off to be killed.

Peter Lippman from the Advocacy Project accompanied the survivors when they made their historic journey this summer. His report of the day's events was sent out to subscribers on July 18 as a continuation of his series on Bosnian refugees, which has run for over a year.

In the next five issues Peter recalls the infamous massacre and its aftermath, through the eyes of survivors and other witnesses that he has met during the course of his work in Bosnia.

Peter has made several visits to Srebrenica. He has also met many relatives of those who died. In 1997 and 1998 Peter worked in Tuzla for a relief organization. He remembers how widows from Srebrenica would visit regularly. They would recount their stories, which usually ended in tears. Like so many others who have come into contact with the relatives, Peter began to feel personally involved in their tragedy.

In this issue, Peter describes the build-up to the massacre between the years of 1992 and 1995 and charts the failure of the international community to curb the escalating fighting in eastern Bosnia.

Each successive concession encouraged the Serbs to spurn international opinion and intensify the pressure. When they finally chose the final solution for eradicating the Muslim presence from Srebrenica in July 1995, it was simply the logical conclusion to a long and shameful process.

The War Begins

Most of northern and eastern Bosnia fell to the Serbs quickly in the spring of 1992. But Srebrenica was remote and protected by surrounding hills, and a military resistance was organized there. During the first few months of the war, the front lines in this area were fluid. As Muslims were quickly expelled from the eastern region between Zvornik and Višegrad, some fled to Tuzla, while others made it to Srebrenica and nearby Žepa. Meanwhile, Serb forces took control of territory surrounding these two towns, and they became enclaves. Amir Salihović described to me his flight from his native village near Višegrad:

"I lived in a village where I had 117 dunums of land that was all my own. I drove a taxi for a living. I was also a hunter, and I was the president of a local hunter's lodge. I retired in 1983. On

June 10th, 1992, the Užice Corps from Serbia came to Višegrad. They were shooting and burning. I left the village that night, through the woods to the river Drina, and then made my way to Žepa. There were 12 of us who left, and 5 were killed. I was with friends, cousins, and my wife.

“When we arrived in Žepa, bodies began to float down the river. We organized to catch them and bury them. It was a real horror. Then from Žepa I went to Srebrenica in August of 1992. I went there because of food. There was nothing to eat in Žepa. At that time, there were around 45,000 refugees in Srebrenica. My wife died in Srebrenica, when a bomb hit our apartment. And my mother died in Macedonia. She had gone there in a convoy, and she died three days after arriving.”

As 1992 wore on, the Serb forces solidified their control over two-thirds of Bosnia. The front line dividing Serb-held territory from the rest of Bosnia remained more or less static until the summer of 1995. But in the Srebrenica enclave, commander of the Muslim army Naser Orić led a struggle to expand territory under his control. In the fall and winter of 1992, Orić was able to conduct an effective campaign. He almost succeeded in breaking through to the Muslim/Croat-controlled area around Tuzla, to the northwest of Srebrenica. By January 1993, 350 square kilometers of territory was under Orić’s control. The enclave reached from the Drina to within five miles of the Tuzla front line.

During this period, the people of Srebrenica and its surrounding villages were usually hungry. Sanel, from the village of Sućeska near Srebrenica, described to me what it was like:

“We ate oats that were meant for the horses and cows, and willow tree buds -- only goats eat that. We made a soup out of thistles. Then we ground corncobs and made a paste out of it and ate it, and we couldn’t go to the bathroom for days after that. We made bread out of squash seeds. We were hungry. That’s when we had to go to the Serb villages to steal food. In February of 1993, the first ‘lunch’ packages were airdropped. Clinton started that.”

Srebrenica was surrounded by Muslim and Serb villages. At the beginning of the war Serbs were quickly driven out of the Muslim-controlled enclave, just as Muslims were expelled from the surrounding areas. Periodically Naser Orić would lead forays against the Serb villages on the periphery of the enclave. On these occasions, civilians would follow the army and take whatever food they could find. If the hungry Srebrenicans found Serb civilians, often they would kill them. On the other hand, the Srebrenicans would carry a pistol or hand grenade to kill themselves if necessary, in order to avoid falling into the hands of the Serb army.

Conditions were worse in Srebrenica itself than in the surrounding villages, where people could at least find some wild food and occasionally cultivate a garden. Emir Suljagić started to work as a translator for international officials at the age of 17, early in the war. He described the town as being so crowded with refugees that thousands were sleeping in the streets.

Srebrenica was becoming a “concentration camp without barbed wire,” as Suljagić called it. He recounted how refugees would arrive with their livestock, which would soon be slaughtered, and the meat traded off for other food. “We ate once, occasionally twice a day. The summer days got

longer, and we waited for sunset to take another bite of food. Thin soup and beans were the most common fare; meat was the privilege of the rich, or better put, the group of war profiteers that quickly formed in the enclave. Each day we were thinner than the day before. One man traded his wedding ring for several kilos of peppers. He wasn't the only person who traded the last thing he owned for a few crumbs of food." ("Dani" July 7, 2000)

"Safe Haven"

In this period, Naser Orić's army caused great problems for the Serb forces that surrounded Srebrenica. Hundreds of Serb soldiers and civilians were killed as Orić fought to unite his enclave with Tuzla. The Serb forces that controlled most of eastern Bosnia were determined to prevent this from taking place. In February 1993, commander of the Bosnian Serb army General Ratko Mladić launched an offensive against Srebrenica. Over the next few weeks, Serb forces chipped away at Muslim-controlled territory. In the face of this offensive thousands of additional refugees fled to Srebrenica.

Within a couple of weeks the Serbs recovered most of the territory that Orić had taken over, and the enclave was reduced to an area of less than 140 square kilometers. The offensive threatened over 50,000 people who were trapped in the Srebrenica enclave. At this point the Muslim government in Sarajevo announced a boycott of aid from the West as long as the desperate plight of Srebrenica was ignored. After a week of pressure, the United States agreed to parachute food into Srebrenica.

The food that arrived was unevenly distributed, and people continued to eat poorly. Some people were killed when the heavy air-dropped food pallets fell on them. Later, when aid convoys reached Srebrenica, Emir Suljagić noted that a good portion of the aid would end up for sale in the town market the day after its arrival. Often the aid that was delivered was far from what was needed, as when the Russians sent in a convoy carrying tons of aluminum cookware.

In any case, the food aid did not slow the Serb offensive, and conditions became unbearable as the population of the enclave swelled. Simon Mardel, a doctor with the World Health Organization, hiked into Srebrenica to report on conditions there. He noted "considerable weight loss. Many pneumonia cases. Mortality rate 20 to 30 per day due to sickness. But hunger is contributing to this." He reported that doctors had been performing surgery for months. Emir Suljagić recalled one man desperately trying to trade a cow in return for a blood transfusion for his brother.

In response to Mardel's dire report General Philippe Morillon, commander of UNPROFOR (the U.N. Protection Force), traveled in a convoy to Srebrenica on March 10, 1993, at the height of the Serb offensive. His intention was to evaluate the situation and leave the next morning. But a crowd of women and children blocked his car, calling for him to stay and protect the town. Morillon decided to make the best of it. He climbed up on the roof of the post office where he had been sleeping and hung up a U.N. flag. He made a declaration to the people of Srebrenica that he would not abandon them, that Srebrenica was from then on protected by U.N. forces. Soon after, Morillon met with then-President of Serbia Slobodan Milošević and pressured him to influence the Bosnian Serb forces to call off the offensive.

A cease-fire was put in place, but it quickly deteriorated as Serb forces moved closer to Srebrenica. The international community renewed pressure on Serb leaders, making it clear to them that they were risking military retaliation. In mid-April the Serbs agreed to halt the offensive in return for the demilitarization of the enclave. At this time the U.N. Security Council declared Srebrenica a “safe area.” Muslim troops within the enclave were required to surrender their weapons, and in return a contingent of UNPROFOR would establish bases in the enclave, intended to “deter” attacks from the surrounding Serbs.

Canadian troops established a base in Srebrenica, and several observation posts around the enclave. They were soon replaced by a Dutch battalion (Dutchbat), few other countries being willing to volunteer for the task. And the idea of the “safe area” was never adequately defined. Real demilitarization did not take place. Suljagić recounted, “No one wanted to give up his gun. Mainly old and useless weapons were handed over, for which there was no ammunition, and guns hand-made from plumbing pipe and some form of trigger mechanism. Several thousand rifles remained in the hands of the Srebrenica units.” The Bosnian military structure continued to function, outside of the town boundaries of Srebrenica, but within the enclave.

The people of the “safe area” continued a marginal existence. Food aid arrived rarely, and hunger continued as before. For the time being, Serb attacks on the enclave ceased. But Bosnian forces under Orić knew that they would not be able to defend themselves against a concerted attack by General Mladić, should he decide to take over Srebrenica.

Hasan Nuhanović, another young translator for U.N. forces in Srebrenica, said, “At every meeting where I was translator, the question was posed, “How do you think you will defend this place in case of attack?” The answer was, NATO airplanes are covering the skies of Bosnia, and they can arrive at the “protected zone” within two to three minutes after our call, and eliminate any attacking formation... Although they admitted that they were not capable of defending Srebrenica with the forces they had on the ground, they tried to convince us that their air support was completely sufficient.” (“Ljiljan,” July 17, 2000)

International Surrender

Together with Srebrenica, five other “safe areas” were established by the United Nations in 1993. The intention of the United Nations was to stabilize the map of Bosnia, pursuant to a negotiated peace that would determine the layout of post-war Bosnia. But in agreeing to protect the Srebrenica enclave, the United Nations established a fatal contradiction that would doom the “safe area” plan to failure.

The U.N. mandate in Bosnia required its troops to act with neutrality. In reality, UNPROFOR was protecting aid deliveries, not local residents. Its freedom of movement was at the mercy of the stronger belligerent; in eastern Bosnia this was the Serbs. As a result, the Dutch battalion’s ability to protect, or at least feed, the inhabitants of Srebrenica depended on the cooperation of the Serbs. This cooperation was generally bought with bribes, such as a portion of the aid intended for the enclave. Whenever it suited the strategic needs of the Serbs, the cooperation disappeared.

Furthermore, the Serb forces saw the U.N. peacekeepers as potential hostages with which to gain leverage for their demands. U.N. troops were thus taken hostage on more than one occasion, such as when air strikes took place in fall 1994 against Serb positions around Bihać. U.N. officials thereafter believed that any belligerent action on their part would result in disaster, with more of their soldiers being taken hostage.

In the two years after the establishment of the Srebrenica enclave, the war carried on throughout Bosnia with ups and downs. There were no significant changes of the front line in eastern Bosnia during that time. A 1994 Serb offensive against Gorazde, another “safe area” to the south of Srebrenica, took some territory but failed to conquer the city. With the end of the customary winter cease-fire in 1995, the Serbs hoped to change the balance of forces in eastern Bosnia once and for all, and to bring an end to the war. Muslim-controlled Srebrenica was in their way, and they resolved to take it over.

Early in 1995 Ratko Mladić’s forces began encroaching upon the boundaries of the Srebrenica enclave. They continued attacks with the pretext of retaliation for Orić’s ongoing food raids. In the coming months Mladić halted aid convoys into Srebrenica, including food and fuel supplies for the Dutch troops. Relations worsened between the Dutch and the Muslims they were supposed to be protecting. Local Muslim officials wanted a guarantee that the United Nations would defend Srebrenica if it were attacked, and the Dutch wanted Muslim forces to cease their provocative raids on Serb positions and outlying Serb villages.

Early in the spring, Muslim army commanders in Sarajevo ordered most of the top commanders in Srebrenica, including Naser Orić, to leave the enclave for “consultations and training.” Orić was never to return, and this was fatal to the morale and cohesion of the troops defending Srebrenica.

In late May events took place in other parts of Bosnia that affected the destiny of Srebrenica. The Serbs tightened the siege on Sarajevo, violating an agreement from the previous year. In response, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombed several ammunition dumps, and the Serbs retaliated by bombing all six “safe havens.” They bombed the center of Tuzla at night, resulting in the deaths of 71 victims, the largest single bombing casualty in the war. The Serbs then took over 300 U.N. personnel hostage, confirming the fears of the international community. This brought the U.N. military operations to a complete halt.

Serb pressure on international troops resulted in tension among the U.N.’s military and civilian leaders. Most, including General Bernard Janvier, commander of U.N. troops in the former Yugoslavia, opposed retaliation. Janvier, in fact, had advocated withdrawal from the enclaves as militarily untenable positions. On the other hand, General Rupert Smith, commander of UNPROFOR in Bosnia, opposed negotiations with the hostage-takers, feeling that they would not have the nerve to carry through their threats of execution. He favored applying force to resolve the situation.

U.N. special envoy Yasushi Akashi took Janvier’s side and declared that air strikes would be used only extreme cases of self-defense. Then-U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali

required a personal veto on NATO air attacks. NATO's response was thus constrained by a "double key," whereby its actions had to be approved by UNPROFOR.

Janvier and Akashi were counting on the effectiveness of negotiations, hoping to calm the crisis and hold out until a political settlement could be negotiated. But events proved that the Serbs were determined at all costs to achieve control of a territory free of enclaves. After talks between Janvier and Mladić in mid-June, the Serbs freed the hostages. It was clear to them and to NATO that the United Nations was not going to sanction the use of air strikes.

Following these developments, NATO reduced its jet patrols over Bosnia, thus creating the need for a longer advance-notice in the event of air strikes.

Glossary / Who's Who:

BOUTROS BOUTROS-GHALI: U.N. Secretary-General during war in Bosnia.

DUTCHBAT: Dutch battalion stationed at Srebrenica.

EMIR SULJAGIĆ: A young Srebrenican who worked as interpreter for U.N. troops in Srebrenica.

GENERAL BERNARD JANVIER: Commander of U.N. troops in the former Yugoslavia

GENERAL PHILIPPE MORILLON: Commander of UNPROFOR in 1993, made trip to Srebrenica and promised its safety.

GENERAL RATKO MLADIĆ: Commander of Army of Republika Srpska, closely involved in fall of Srebrenica and subsequent massacres, indicted for war crimes.

GENERAL RUPERT SMITH: Commander of UNPROFOR in Bosnia

HASAN NUHANOVIĆ: Young Srebrenican employed as interpreter for U.N. during war. The Dutch allowed his entire family to be taken away by the Serbs.

NASER ORIĆ: Commander of Muslim forces protecting (and for a time, enlarging) Srebrenica enclave from 1992 to 1995)

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

SLOBODAN MILOŠEVIĆ: President of Serbia during the war; now President of Yugoslavia

SDA: Party of Democratic Action; Muslim nationalist party headed by Alija Izetbegovic.

SIMON MARDEL: Doctor for World Health Organization who hiked into Srebrenica to give report of health conditions there under siege.

UNPROFOR: U.N. Protection Force, tasked with protecting civilians throughout Bosnia during the war.

YASUSHI AKASHI: U.N. special envoy to Bosnia